

PERFORMANCE OF ACTIVISM: EXAMINING THE USE OF SAYA BY  
AFROBOLIVIAN SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

BY

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THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

For almost a century, the African descended populations of Bolivia have preserved an exclusive traditional musical art known as the Saya. The Saya, an art form rooted in African tradition, consists of singing and dancing and is considered by many as a significant treasure of Afrobolivian heritage. Primarily inhabiting the Yungas region of the Bolivian Department of La Paz, Afrobolivians have begun utilizing social movements in order to achieve specific sociopolitical goals put forth by their communities. In the interest of promulgating their social movement efforts, Afrobolivian activists are using the Saya as a vehicle for outreach. This thesis will argue that as a result of the Saya's use in this way by Afrobolivian activists, the Saya has transformed from what was once only perceived as a customary aspect of Afrobolivian culture into a brazen symbol of the movement. This thesis will also examine the degree through which these outreach efforts are reaching young people.

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# CHAPTER 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Overview of study and methodology

Social movements have been on the rise in Bolivia. Indigenous groups standing together in solidarity and demanding that their voices be heard has become conventional phenomena. Decades of collective activism via social movements throughout indigenous communities have not only put Bolivia on the map as a center for indigenous resistance, but have also revealed the sheer power that social movements can exert for initiating change. Examples of such changes prompted by social movements could include the abandonment of privatized water by the Bolivian government in 2000, (Lewis & Olivera, 2004) and the forced resignation of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, one of the nation's most controversial leaders in 2003 (Farthing & Kohl, 2006 ). Bolivian social movements have been proven effective for influencing state actors and provoking change. Even today, collective activism is still the default method for expressing disapproval of many different issues, with land and education reform, indigenous rights, and political corruption being among the most common.

Events in the Bolivian Yungas offer an example of such activism. The Yungas region, merely hours away from the capital city of La Paz, is where Bolivia's black populations are using their traditional musical art, known as the *Saya* in order to bring attention to a diverse set of social and political injustices which they claim have been levied against them since colonial times. One of the primary organizations leading the Afrobolivian social movement is the *Movimiento Cultural Saya Afroboliviana* (Afrobolivian Cultural Saya Movement/ MOCUSABOL) a Saya-oriented organization dedicated to promoting the Afrobolivian cause. MOCUSABOL has largely served as the flagship organization of the Afrobolivian people, and since its beginning has used *Saya* as its principal method of outreach. The organization has

prided itself on effectively promoting consciousness of the movement within Bolivia and abroad through the Saya.

During the summer of 2015 I travelled to La Paz, Bolivia to learn more about the Afrobolivian social movement, its objectives, and MOCUSABOL's role in the movement. I also sought to investigate the impressions that the Saya was leaving on young people living in the department of La Paz. The primary method of addressing these questions was interview supplemented with some participant observation at a Saya performance (pseudonyms are used throughout this work.) The study population was divided into two separate categories: the activists and the young adults.

The participants in the activists group consisted of 22 MOCUSABOL-affiliated individuals and Saya performers (known in the Yungas as *sayeros*.) The activists were primarily interviewed at the MOCUSABOL main office in La Paz and within a smaller satellite office of MOCUSABOL located in the Yungas. Activists were also interviewed at a local bar in La Paz where I attended a Saya performance. In addition to learning more about the movement and the role of MOCUSABOL, I asked activists and *sayeros* if they believed the Afrobolivian social movement had been a success, and invited them to share what their hopes were for the future of the movement.

The participants of the young adults group consisted of people between the ages of 20-35 that I encountered primarily in the city square (Plaza Murillo), within the vicinities of universities, and in various cafes in La Paz and the Yungas. A total of 45 people participated in this part of the study. I asked the young adults if they had ever heard of the Afrobolivian social movement and if so, to describe how they became aware of it. I also questioned individuals if they believed black culture was prevalent in the country. The feedback that I received from the



activists and the young adults will be discussed and analyzed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 will evaluate my own experiences attending a Saya performance and my perception of how it was received by the people around me.

In compiling and analyzing the data from my research, I hope this thesis project will assist in providing a better understanding of the Saya and its recent transformation from a little-known display of Afrobolivian heritage into a much more widely recognized representation of the Afrobolivian social movement. In what follows, I will argue that the Saya is no longer perceived as just an aspect of Afrobolivian culture in Bolivia, but is now a symbol of the Afrobolivian social movement itself.

## **1.2 Brief history of the Afrobolivians**

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, millions of African slaves were brought to the Americas. Africans were imported into North and South America by European colonizers who depended upon slave labor to sustain the economies of their New World empires. More than half of the estimated 13 million Africans would be transported to slave holding colonies in South America. In the Spanish Andean colony of Upper Peru (now the country of Bolivia) slave labor was used primarily in the silver mines of Potosí in the south. Throughout the centuries, tens of thousands of enslaved Africans worked in the mining caves of the Cerro Rico Mountain (Maconde, 2000). Because they were not accustomed to the extremely cold weather and high altitude of the Andes, many Africans perished upon arrival. Even more workers succumbed to the intense physical labor of the caves and the many lung diseases that accompanied mining work. A young male slave assigned to work in the mines of Potosí had a life expectancy of only 5-20 years. Therefore with each passing century, the population of African slaves continued to decrease (Crespo, 1977, pp.10-13).

Slavery was a very contentious issue in Bolivia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. As many Latin American countries began to ban the slave trade by both land and sea, Bolivia signed a number of treaties to prevent the importation of additional slaves within its borders. In 1837, Bolivia, which had a Pacific coastline at the time, signed a treaty with Great Britain to prohibit its citizens from participating in the slave trade. Although it marked a significant step in the elimination of slavery in the country, this treaty did not abolish slavery in Bolivia. However, in 1851 President Manuel Isidoro Belzu declared an end to slavery and subsequently amended the constitution which proclaimed that slavery “[does] not exist and cannot exist in the territory” (Crespo, 1977, p.93).

After slavery was abolished, the remaining Africans struggled to make a living. This forced the majority of them to pursue work in the agricultural sector. Bolivia’s small Afro-descended population largely settled in the valleys of the Yungas near the capital city of La Paz. [See figure 1] The Yungas which consists of an isolated ecoregion of dense subtropical brush, is still home to over 87% of Bolivia’s black population today (Maconde, 2000). The Afro-descended communities of Bolivia live alongside indigenous Aymara groups. This proximity has influenced various aspects of Afrobolivian culture such as cuisine, clothing, and perhaps most observable, in the Spanish spoken by Afro-descendants in the region. “Afrobolivian Spanish” is a dialect spoken in the Yungas, its Afrobolivian and Aymara origins are what sets it apart from Spanish spoken in other parts of the country (Lipski, 2009). The proximities of both Aymara and Afrobolivian communities within the Yungas mean that both groups share a very similar agricultural way of life. Although there has been some intermarriage between Afrobolivians and the Aymara over the course of two centuries, the two communities are mostly separate. Cultural tensions between the two groups have sometimes prevented a friendly coexistence. Some

AfroBolivians believe this is due to the fact that most indigenous groups were socially elevated once Africans were brought to the country as slaves. Native Bolivians were no longer at the bottom of society as they had been during the early colonial years (Ballivian, 2014). Stereotypes of AfroBolivian people are plentiful in the Yungas region. Blacks report being the objects of racial slurs and actions by indigenous Bolivians. One particular act is rooted in the centuries-old belief that blacks are lucky. It is not uncommon for AfroBolivians to be randomly touched by indigenous people who believe that doing so will bring them good fortune (Escárzaga & Gutiérrez, 2006, p. 94). This is especially a cause of tension between the two groups as AfroBolivians feel as though they are being treated more as objects/amulets than as human beings.

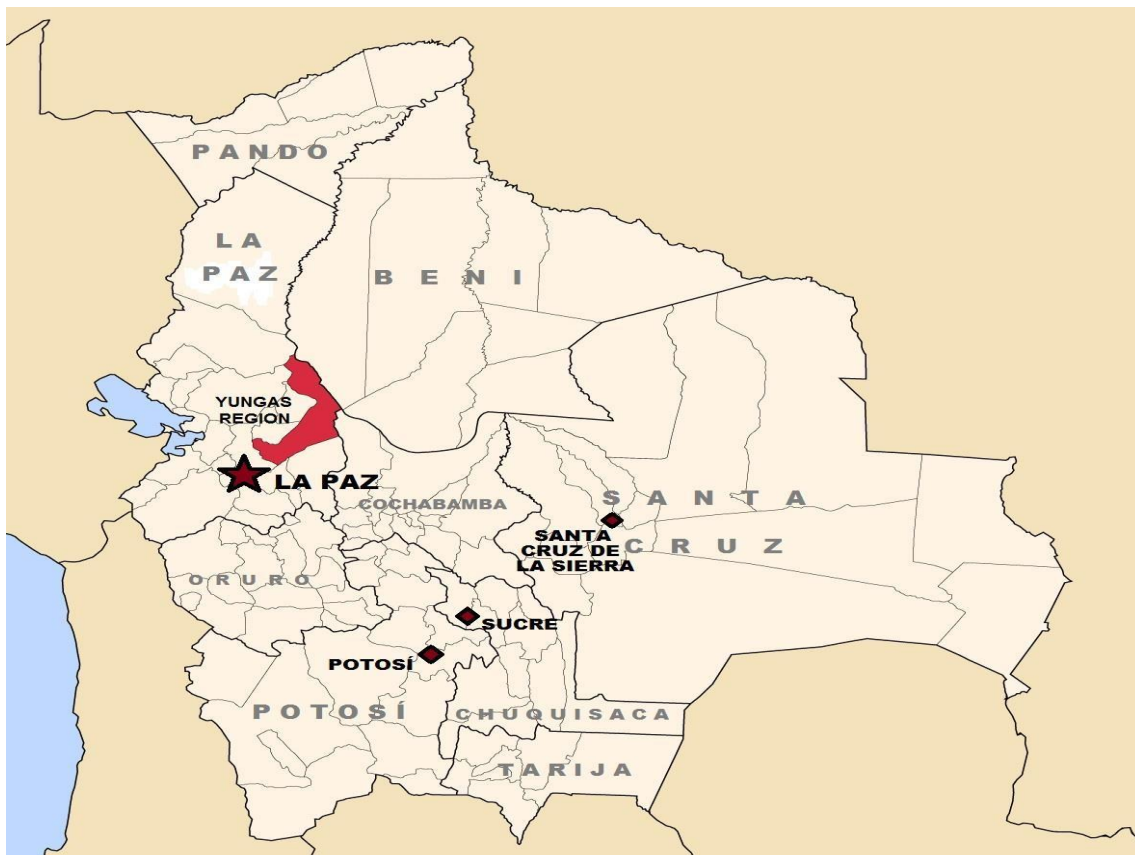


Figure 1: Map of Bolivia.

As residents of the Yungas, the Afrobolivian presence is more localized to the northwestern part of the country. Therefore, Bolivia's black presence has largely remained unseen in other areas. For nearly 300 years Bolivia's Afro communities have been able to maintain a ceremonial monarchy, with a royal family headed by King Julio Pinedo. The Afrobolivian people regard Pinedo as a direct descendant of Congolese royalty (Ballivian, 2014). The monarchy of the Afrobolivian people is currently the oldest and the sole surviving monarchy of its kind in Latin America. The Afrobolivians have also preserved many other aspects of their culture, however, the most revered of their cultural traditions is the Saya. For roughly 86 years, black Bolivians have practiced the Saya to narrate their oral history, celebrations, and cultural identity (Ballivian, 2014, p.86). Afrobolivians pride themselves on the African origin of the Saya and despite indigenous influences, continue to characterize the Saya as uniquely Afrobolivian. This "alignment" to the African origins of the Saya, and away from indigenous influences by Afrobolivian groups is typical of music revivalists who affirm legitimacy of traditional music based on reference to authenticity and historic fidelity (Livingston, 1999).

### **1.3 The Saya and Afrobolivian Grievances**

The passing down of traditional music through time from generation to generation is not unique to Afrobolivian communities. Afro-oriented music has been preserved throughout the western hemisphere in the same way. The conservation of Afro-folk music is particularly visible in South America where *Samba* in Brazil, *Música Criolla* in Peru, and *Candombe* in Uruguay, have all considerably become integrated into the musical identities of their respective cultures. This is evident as these art forms have been utilized within their national borders to promote

tourism and have also been utilized in the commercialization of memorabilia, which is not yet the case in Bolivia.

AfroBolivians proclaim the Saya to be an original art form that is an authentic product of AfroBolivian heritage. Martín Miguel Ballivian, a prominent scholar of black Bolivian history and culture, describes a conversation that he had with Angelica Pinedo, wife of King Julio Pinedo and respected village elder concerning the history of the Saya. Ballivian recounts Pinedo as providing the following response regarding her earliest memories of the Saya:

“Oh la Saya es muy antiguo... cuando yo era pequeña  
he escuchado en Mururata<sup>1</sup>, hay habían puro negros eran (...)  
La Saya ha debido empezar desde el año 1930, yo he nacido en  
1920, el 2 de Agosto.”

"Oh the Saya is very old ... when I was a little girl,  
I heard in Mururata, there were pure blacks there (...)  
The Saya must have started in the year 1930, I was born on  
August 2, 1920.”

The origins of the Saya is heavily debated in Bolivia as it contains very strong similarities with another musical art form known as *Caporales*. Caporales is an indigenous folk dance that AfroBolivians regard as an “imitation” which utilizes aspects of the Saya (Gobierno Municipal, 1997). Although there are many other folk songs and dances in Bolivia, such as *Tuntuna*, and *Tundiqui* (also spelled *Tundiki*), black Bolivians rarely participate in other musical performances.

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<sup>1</sup> Mountainous region of the Yungas.

Just like Caporales, many Afrobolivian activists argue that a number of these dance styles have borrowed certain body movements and rhythms from Saya (Gobierno Municipal, 1997). This is especially the case with regards to Tundiqui, where non-black performers cover their faces and bodies with charcoal paste and dance with exaggerated movements. Tundiqui performers typically dress themselves in tattered clothing accompanied with chains and wooden stocks. Afrobolivians not only consider this a distasteful emulation of their culture, but also a grotesque display of racial stereotypes (Maconde, 2000).

The condemnation of Tundiqui and other grievances against the Afrobolivian community have been cause for resistance. Afrobolivian interests groups have also demanded overall societal change. Perhaps one of the most pressing grievances for Afrobolivians is the issue of social mobility. Afrobolivian activists claim that the “intense changes” the country has undergone over many decades at the political, cultural, and economic levels, have prevented blacks from advancing economically (MOCUSABOL, 2007). The majority of the changes in question took place between the 1950’s and 1980’s. During this time, Bolivia experienced waves of nationalization and centralistic policies in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and a shift toward decentralization and neoliberalism by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which I will discuss later. The “State of 52” was an effort by the Bolivian government to address the demands of its people by providing social services and employing thousands of its citizens (Arze & Kruse, 2004). Although these measures improved the lives of many poor people, Afrobolivian activists argue that for them, little changed regarding the poor economic status of their communities.

The grievances of the Afrobolivian community are plentiful and over the years black activists have put forth demands to government entities to address them. These demands include calls for greater black representation in Bolivian politics, and increased incorporation into

Bolivian society and national identity. The demands also include laws that would protect black Bolivians from racial discrimination in the workplace and institutions of higher education (MOCUSABOL, 2007). According to a 2011 report by the United Nations World Food Program, the quality of life in Afrobolivian communities is low and is marred by severe disadvantages in health, access to education, income, life expectancy, literacy and employment (United Nations World Food Program, 2011). Also, as I learned from my interviews, the Yungas region lacks many basic services such as running water, electricity, drains and roads. Although these deficiencies are common in rural areas throughout the Bolivian state, some Afrobolivian activists have claimed that these deficiencies are manifested more prominently in black communities.

#### **1.4 Founding of MOCUSABOL and the Afrobolivian social movement**

Until fairly recently, the Bolivian government had been very reluctant to recognize African-descended communities as a “pueblo” or people (Maconde, 2000). This presented a significant challenge for Afrobolivian groups seeking to organize themselves. For centuries Bolivians were unaware of the exact number of Afro-descended individuals that lived in the Yungas region and perhaps in other areas throughout the country. During my interview with Rogelio De La Cruz, current president of MOCUSABOL, he explained to me how difficult it must have been for previous generations to organize any type of communal activism when there is a lack of knowledge concerning the number of individuals that share a common grievance. In addition, Bolivia has a long history of dictatorial rule. Military dictatorships plagued Bolivia and many other Latin American countries throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it was commonly understood that challenging the government and social activism could be life-threatening.

Dictators ruled Bolivia during the mid-1960's and early-1980's when the government began to reject populism in favor of a bourgeois state where the military and the country's elites held absolute power (McSherry, 2005). Dictatorships, particularly in Latin America were notorious for the suppression and persecution of opposing dissidents. Carlos Mena Burgos, commander of the country's intelligence agency is alleged to have arranged for the torture and murder of political opponents during the 1970's (McSherry, 2005, pp.183-184). Burgos' actions were part of a wider-spread regional effort by the United States and military regimes in the Americas to prevent the rise of anti-government protests and left-leaning ideologiess during the Cold War. This period of political repression and state terror is known as *Operation Condor*. Other countries in the region including Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay (all dictatorships at the time) also participated in the program which claimed thousands of victims who were tortured, killed, or "disappeared." Therefore social resistance movements would have been extremely difficult and risky pre-1980.

Right-leaning policies were customary in Bolivia during the 1980's, and as a result the sociopolitical atmosphere became more chaotic, civil unrest ensued as well. As the government opened Bolivia to the international free market, more of Bolivia's industries became privatized. With this rampant privatization came tax hikes, government restructuring, and unemployment (Arze & Kruse, 2004). This created massive dissent and the people began to protest. During the *New Economic Policy*, a series of neoliberal reforms implemented by President Víctor Paz Estenssoro (1985-1989) were protested. The country's labor/trade unions organized themselves against the president while nationwide demonstrations eventually forced Estenssoro from power, a man who had previously served three presidential terms. (Silva, 2009, pp. 103-104).



The economic policies of Bolivia during the decade aligned closely with U.S. fiscal conservatism (Reaganomics) and Thatcherism (Farthing & Kohl, 2006). Neoliberal policies were forced upon a number of countries seeking financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Bolivia was heavily indebted to a number of foreign entities and sought assistance from the banks which forced the government to divert funds away from social welfare programs. These measures disproportionately affected low-income workers and farmers who were heavily dependent upon those public services. Kohl and Farthing suggests that for such lending institutions, the focus remained largely on ensuring neoliberal practices were observed and debts were repaid in a given country more so than social unrest.

According to Nick Crossley, Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester, protests and movements tend to emerge and flourish during periods when small cracks in societal structure create opportunity for mobilization (Crossley 110). Because the modern Afrobolivian social movement was born during the rise of anti-neoliberal resistance movements, I argue that the opportunity for Afrobolivian collective activism arrived via the state of agitation caused in the country following the implementation of neoliberal policies and the chaos that followed.

By the late 1980's, Afrobolivian activists began to look towards Saya as a way to express discontent with their circumstances, while at the same time promoting and celebrating their culture and heritage. In 1988 black organizations in the Yungas and La Paz founded MOCUSABOL. MOCUSABOL is currently headquartered in La Paz with dozens of passionate sayeros of all ages who travel the country performing the Saya. The Saya is performed in various settings including during communal gatherings, parades, in parks, city squares, universities, clubs, bars, and other venues.

There seems to be no single explanation of how the Afrobolivian activists of the 1980's chose to combine the Saya with the social movement in such a manner. There is no mention of a social movement in works published about Afrobolivian history and culture prior to the mid-1980s. Therefore the relationship between the Saya and the Afrobolivian social movement was virtually non-existent until the formation of MOCUSABOL. Generally, the Saya was seen and written about as merely a “rasgo<sup>2</sup>” or a *characteristic* of Afrobolivian culture pre-1988 (Gobierno Municipal, 1997). Yet today, the Saya is almost always inextricably linked to Afrobolivian collective activism.

The fusion of folklore and social movements is not a new phenomenon. When music becomes “folklorized” it is often used as a representation of a specific culture. Folklorization occurs when groups of people intentionally choreograph, compose, and perform for themselves and others what they want to represent about their identity. (Cadena de la, & Starn, 2007). These representations can be targeted to audiences at the local, regional, and national levels. For MOCUSABOL activists, Afrobolivian pride and social activism is what is exerted through their use of the Saya. According to sociologists Ronald Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, cultural traditions are mobilized and reformulated in social movements, and the mobilization and reconstruction of tradition is central to what social movements are, and to what they signify for social and cultural change (Eyerman, Jamison, 1998). Therefore in the case of Saya, the integration of culture and politics *is* what creates the Afrobolivian social movement.

In their book, *Music and Social Movements* (1998) Eyerman and Jamison discuss the many “sorrow songs” of African American (US) slaves as an example of the integration of cultural tradition and activism. They argue that over time these sorrow songs, which were once sung by

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<sup>2</sup> Rasgo (Spanish) masc. meaning feature, characteristic, trait. Definition taken from Cambridge online Spanish-English dictionary.

slaves as an “expression of deep cultural truth” and to get through the workday, became the basis for the “freedom songs” a century later. The freedom songs were deeply integrated into the African American civil rights movement and were instrumental for encouraging solidarity in the 1950s and early 1960s. This paper argues that the Saya has been transformed in a similar manner. The art form which was once merely a display of Afrobolivian culture, is now synonymous with the Afrobolivian social movement.

The idea to utilize the Saya as the primary method for outreach may have been inspired by Afroperuvian folklorists from the 1980’s. While conducting interviews with MOCUSABOL activists in La Paz, two individuals (on separate occasions) mentioned the rise and worldwide recognition of Afroperuvian music during the decade as a possible influence for utilizing the Saya for outreach. One interviewee went as far as to provide the name of Susana Baca in his interview. Susana Baca is a world-renowned Afroperuvian folklorist who is credited by many as effectively introducing the world to Afroperuvian music, as well as the very existence of the Afroperuvian people. While Susana Baca and fellow Afroperuvian folklorist Eva Ayllón, helped to publicize and eventually globalize Afroperuvian culture in the 1980’s, they may also have inspired Afrobolivian activists to use their traditional song and dance, the Saya, to help achieve similar recognition.

Another impetus to the growing recognition of MOCUSABOL and the Afrobolivian social movement over the late 1980’s through early-2000’s was the impact of coca eradication policies, connected to the U.S. “War on Drugs” (Arze, & Kruse, 2004). With the proclaimed intent to curb cocaine usage in the United States, the US government spent millions of dollars each year to fund the eradication of coca. As one of the world’s largest producers of coca, these policies were particularly devastating for Bolivian coca farmers (colloquially known as *cocaleros*). Many

cocaleros were financially crippled by these policies and massive protests quickly ensued. Afrobolivian communities were also affected as a great majority of Yungas residents are coca growers. MOCUSABOL was able to organize black cocaleros of the Yungas together in solidarity with indigenous farmers against the War on Drugs which not only strengthened the opposition, but also raised awareness of the plight of the Afrobolivian people. (Maconde, 2000) MOCUSABOL and its legislative affiliate, the *Centro Afroboliviano para el Desarrollo Integral y Comunitario* (Afrobolivian Center for Integral and Community Development/CADIC) fought hard in the 1990's against these eradication efforts and helped to unite Afrobolivian communities throughout the region. The coca leaf which is used for medicinal and ritual practices, is extremely valued in the Andes and has been the focus of hundreds of protests within a wider social movement context to acknowledge and affirm the people's right to grow coca. (Allen, 2002)

Social movements against coca eradication created spaces for the Afrobolivian social movement to develop and strengthen its stances against policies that negatively affected farmers. Coca eradication efforts also helped to promote solidarity against foreign influence. The political sovereignty of Bolivia is a common nationalistic sentiment in Bolivia which helped to fuel the rise of Evo Morales, a local cocalero, and community activist, to the presidency in 2005 (Guelke, 2010). Although MOCUSABOL claims no official political affiliation, based on the conversations that I had with members, Evo Morales is overwhelmingly supported by the citizens of the Yungas. Morales is a strong advocate of *plurinationalism*, which is especially appealing to the Afrobolivian community as it promotes the idea of inclusion and multinationalism (Radhuber, 2012). Plurinationalism, is defined by political scientist Michael Keating, as “the coexistence within a political order of more than one national identity, with all

the normative claims and implications that entails” (Keating, 2001, p.26). Contrary to previous heads of state, Afrobolivian communities saw in the presidency of Evo Morales a greater opportunity to achieve their national objectives.

During the first year of Morales’ presidency, Morales formed a constitutional assembly in order to draft a new constitution. This was in part due to governmental efforts to move the country forward and away from its Eurocentric past. Afrobolivians saw this new referendum as an opportunity to voice their concerns and possibly secure constitutional protections for their communities. In order to draft a formal proposal to the national assembly, MOCUSABOL partnered with sympathetic organizations including its own, CADIC, the Bogotá -based Christian organization Diakonia Group, the American Jewish World Service, and the IBIS organization in Denmark. With the support of these organizations, MOCUSABOL presented the Bolivian Constituent Assembly with a formal proposal. The proposal listed the demands and goals of the Afrobolivian community as well as the many grievances and social injustices against blacks in the country. The official mission of MOCUSABOL as stated in the proposal is to promote the integration and visibility of the Afrobolivian people in Bolivian society, strengthen the community’s right to self-determination... organizational processes, full citizenship and all entitled rights and benefits (MOCUSABOL, 2007).

Included in the document are dozens of proposed new laws and protections which would guarantee the full constitutional inclusion of Afrobolivian citizens into every level of Bolivian society. The majority of the proposed amendments requests better access to healthcare and education, as well as laws which would reverse the country’s de facto policy of overlooking its small African presence. The proposal also includes a mandate that would incorporate Afrobolivian studies into the curriculum of school children and governmental measures that

would ensure that Afrobolivian culture will be represented by the country's tourism sector. Thus, the demands and inclusion efforts presented in the proposal are the foundation of the current Afrobolivian social movement. MOCUSABOL, which has led the movement building efforts on behalf of the black communities in Bolivia and whose activists have spearheaded most outreach efforts is determined to see these laws passed.

## **1.5 Chapter conclusion**

The Afrobolivians represent a population that is sometimes overlooked in the Plurinational State of Bolivia, a practice that activists are now attempting to reverse through the Saya. The Saya is a traditional musical art that consists of singing and dancing and has been touted by Afrobolivians as the most cherished component of Afrobolivian culture. The Saya has been preserved for generations and was simply regarded as a component of Afrobolivian culture before the creation of the Afrobolivian social movement. MOCUSABOL was born from the state of civil unrest caused by the country's shift away from social welfare to neoliberalism in the late 1980's. The new Saya-oriented organization gained prominence in the Yungas during the War on Drugs where it encouraged solidarity with indigenous farmers against coca eradication. During this time, MOCUSABOL activists and supporters, submitted a formal proposal to the national assembly of Bolivia to raise awareness of their grievances and to demand greater incorporation into the national identity, Afrobolivian representation in Bolivian politics, and laws which would protect Afrobolivians from racial discrimination in the workplace and institutions of higher education. In order to forward the movement and promote the Afrobolivian cause, activists are using the Saya as a vehicle for outreach, which has made the Saya synonymous with Afrobolivian social activism and no longer just an aspect of black Bolivian heritage. I travelled

to La Paz, Bolivia to learn more about the Afrobolivian social movement, their goals, and the role of MOCUSABOL in the movement. I also sought to investigate the impressions the Saya has on young people living in the department of La Paz.

## **CHAPTER 2: Fieldwork**

### **2.1 The Activists**

Today, MOCUSABOL is a well-established entity and through the representation of Jorge Medina (discussed later in the chapter) who now holds a seat in the Bolivian national congress, is finally able to voice their concerns via their own representative. For this part of the project, I wanted to learn whether or not Afrobolivian activists in MOCUSABOL and CADIC thought that their efforts were effective. The answer to this question was assessed by asking members if they believed the Afrobolivian social movement had been successful. I also, inquired about their dreams for the future of the movement. Many of the activists that participated in this study discussed the success the Saya has had for making the movement more well-known. Therefore I sought to uncover whether or not average young Bolivians were even aware of the Afrobolivian social movement and if black culture was visible to them. Knowledge of these things would help to provide a clearer understanding of the activists working behind the movement and if their outreach efforts through Saya were being noticed by younger generations of Bolivians.

The interviews I conducted with the activists took place over the course of one week. I met with members of MOCUSABOL and CADIC primarily at the MOCUSABOL central office in La Paz. I also conducted smaller sets of interviews in various settings while traveling to the Yungas and while attending a Saya performance at the Malegria Pub in La Paz (Chapter 3). The information gathered from my interviews with activists from MOCUSABOL and CADIC revealed that most of them believed that the movement had been successful as of June 2015. Out of 22 activists interviewed for this study, the majority of their responses fell into 3 categories:



- Those that believed the movement had been successful because Afrobolivian interests groups have gained higher memberships
- Those who determined success based on recent government actions brought on by collective activism
- Those who assessed progress based on Saya recognition.

Only one participant did not believe the movement had been a success despite the opposing positions of her counterparts. When asked if she believed the movement to be a success, she responded “no.” Citing a “lack of real progress” and overall perceived “racists attitudes” of average *Paceños* (residents of La Paz.)

## **2.2 Analysis of interviews with the Activists**

The activists who believed the movement was successful based on increased membership within black organizations, largely reminisced about the movement in its early years. Julio Francisco Bernardo, currently an activist of both MOCUSABOL and CADIC noted during his interview that rallying community members in the Yungas in the late 1990’s was not always easy. “When I first got involved with the movement 15 years ago, there was no real community.” He and others spoke about the earlier years of neoliberal reform in Bolivia, a period which lasted roughly 20 years (1985-2005.) During this time, many indigenous groups in the Yungas region and throughout the country were organizing their own social movements and protests against laws which they believed were not in their best interests. Afrobolivian groups that shared many of the same grievances, were aware of the urgency to unite themselves as well. Afrobolivians faced a dilemma at the time because there were multiple small grassroots style groups in the

country which all varied in membership. According to Bernardo, MOCUSABOL made efforts in the late 1990's to consolidate community members and leaders into one group. "It was a challenge because there was not yet a solid list of demands from *our* communities and no one was sure which organization represented us...membership [MOCUSABOL] was low." No one was able to tell me how many members are currently registered in MOCUSABOL or CADIC but virtually every participant in the "activists set" assured me that membership has risen substantially. Many activists consider the increased membership of MOCUSABOL, coupled with the organization's more centralized structure from previous years a "success."

Additionally, there were the activists who believed the movement was successful based on its ability to provoke governmental action. In recent years, the Bolivian government has taken certain actions which have appeased the country's black community. In 2004, the department of La Paz officially recognized the Saya as uniquely Afrobolivian and a valued component of the culture of the department. CADIC proudly displays scanned versions of these documents on the organization's webpage under the sub-heading of "logros" (achievements) (Medina, 2016). In 2006, the government of Santa Cruz agreed for the first time to include "Afrobolivian" as an ethnic group on its municipal census, paving the way for similar action at the national level (Minority Rights Group, 2014). In 2007, Julio Pinedo was formally acknowledged as king of the Afrobolivians by the Bolivian government (Jaegermann, 2010, p.326). More recently in 2014, the national committee against racism and discrimination officially banned Tundique, ruling it as a display of racism. (Gobierno de Bolivia, 2016) A number of activists view these actions as "successes" and have attributed them to the efforts of MOCUSABOL and CADIC. They believe the government's actions were in direct response to years of "pressure" placed on La Paz by the Afrobolivian social movement. When asked whether or not he believed the Afrobolivian social

movement had been as success, Abel Quintana immediately replied “Yes, we have Medina!” Jorge Medina Barra is the founder and director of CADIC. He is very well-known and respected in the black communities of Bolivia and on December 6, 2009 was the first AfroBolivian elected to the National Assembly in the country’s history. For a lot of AfroBolivians, the election of Medina represents a huge success that did not seem possible just a few years before. As Medina is the only black elected official in the country to date, lack of sufficient political representation of more than 30,000 black citizens continues to raise concern for MOCUSABOL. (MOCUABOL, 2007)

Those who assessed progress based on things related to Saya recognition accounted for more than half of the 22 people interviewed in this section of my study. There was a strong sense of accomplishment among the activists that the Saya has become more well-known in Bolivia which as a result, has raised awareness of both the AfroBolivian presence in the country and the social movement. During my visit to a local bar in La Paz, I had the privilege of attending a Saya performance myself. While at the bar, I spoke with Isabel Rosario, a 26 year old Saya performer and proclaimed member of MOCUSABOL. Upon asking her if she believed the AfroBolivian social movement had been a success, she responded with great optimism of the effects the Saya has on spectators. “Every time we come here to perform the Saya, there are more new people that learn about us and come out to watch us.” Isabel was not alone in her impression as 24 year old Victor Suarez Ybarra, another performer interviewed this night expressed similar feelings. “Saya brings people together, that is what it does and you can see that we have done so tonight.” This perception about the Saya and its wider spread recognition within the country served as the basis of my interviews with the young adults. I would later conclude that although Saya was

well-received by younger audiences, knowledge of the Afrobolivian social movement was not truly as widespread as some MOCUSABOL activists and sayeros believed.

### **2.3 Goals for the future of the movement**

The goals for the future of the movement varied from person to person. The responses that I received can also be classified into 3 categories. Those who would like to see increased membership within MOCUSABOL, those who wanted more national and international recognition, and those who would like Saya to become more popularized. There was of course a general desire to see life improve for Afrobolivian communities, yet these 3 objectives were the most mentioned in the study. While conducting fieldwork in the Yungas, one interviewee's comments particularly stood out to me. The comment was made by a MOCUSABOL member who stated that his dream for the future of the movement was to see more participation in the organization from other black groups in Bolivia. "There are more [black people] than what you see here [in the Yungas/ Tocaña- Coroico] but many black people do not identify with us and that is very unfortunate." This comment reminded me as a researcher that it is very easy to assume that all Bolivians of African descent stand in solidarity with MOCUSABOL/ CADIC and their national objectives, and this is not true. The passion for Saya and the many possibilities it has for fueling the Afrobolivian cause is common amongst the activists. Based on their interviews, it is clear that many activists believe that once Saya becomes more well-known, so will the movement.

## **2.4 The Young Adults**

This part of the project investigated the assertions made by Afrobolivian activists that recognition of the Afrobolivian social movement had become more widespread in the country. In order to research these speculations, I interviewed a total of 45 individuals between the ages of 20-35. This wing of the research lasted for 3 weeks. Of the 45 young adults, 5 of them were Afrobolivian participants who I met while traveling through the Yungas. I believed this part of the study would benefit from a brief comparative analysis between average young adults of La Paz and young adults from the Yungas.

Participants were asked if they had ever heard about the Afrobolivian social movement and how. Feedback from the young adults regarding this question would reveal whether or not knowledge of the movement is actually reaching younger generations of Bolivians. Additionally, I questioned individuals if they believed black culture was prevalent in the country. If the participants responded that they had indeed heard about the Afrobolivian social movement, it was important for me to know exactly how they became aware. In the past, Afrobolivian activists have utilized a variety of outreach methods to publicize the movement. These methods have been via radio, televised interviews with local journalists, and more recently, Saya performances. The responses from this question would help me to better understand if black presence (cuisine, Saya, history) is even visible to young people at all. Also, to evaluate which outreach methods have been more effective for reaching out to young people. Due to the fact that Afrobolivians feel invisible, I wanted to analyze for myself if “blackness” is truly hidden in the country. Newer generations of Bolivians who are living in a society very different from the

generations of their parents and grandparents, may have experienced a Bolivian society where Afrobolivians and their culture and struggles are more apparent.

## **2.5 Analysis of interviews with Young Adults**

After compiling the data received, I discovered that contrary to the beliefs of MOCUSABOL, less than half of the 45 people interviewed had ever heard about the Afrobolivian social movement. Far less interviewees believed that black culture was prevalent/visible in the country. However, I discovered that as many activists suspected, Saya was proven to be an effective method for outreach. The majority of the people who reported having heard of the Afrobolivian social movement associated it with the Saya. This is a very important point because the question that I posed to the participants of this group was if they had ever heard of the *Afrobolivian social movement* and no reference to Saya. Everyone that answered yes, responded that they had become aware of it solely because they either attended a Saya performance themselves where they received information regarding the movement, or had simply equated the social movement with the Saya.

When asked if they had heard of the Afrobolivian social movement, 67% had never heard of it at all [see table 1.] A great number of those who had never heard of the movement were unaware of the existence of native-born Bolivians of African descent. A few participants questioned whether I was referring to immigrant communities. Some of them assumed that I was referring to black immigrants from Brazil who may now be living in Bolivia. A number of them were even flabbergasted to learn that my question referred to efforts by Afrobolivian communities in La Paz and the Yungas. This came as a surprise to me because I assumed that more young people would be aware of the existence of Afrobolivians due to social media,

increased enrollment of Afrobolivian youth in universities, as well as the increased number of Afrobolivian commuters traveling to La Paz from the Yungas for work and shopping.

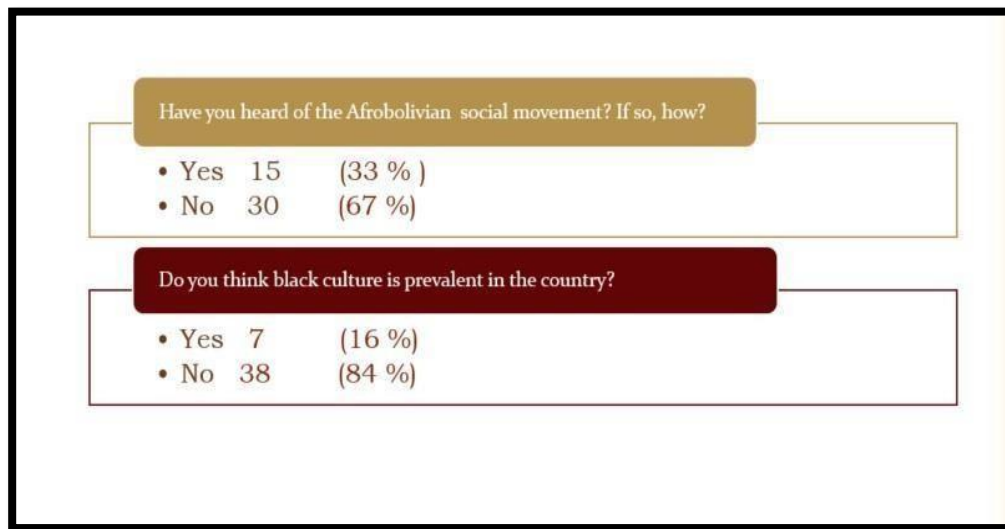


Table 1

With such a high percentage of young people who had not heard of the Afrobolivian social movement, I was not surprised to discover that a majority 84% of participants did not believe black culture was prevalent in the country. Just as many people were unaware of the existence of Afrobolivians at all. After answering “no” to this question, one particular individual reaffirmed to me that blackness has no place in Bolivian national identity. Affirming indigenous roots herself, she argued that because Bolivia is a majority indigenous nation, the country should not have to “force itself” to celebrate the heritage of others. Of course this position is in direct

opposition to the concept of plurinationality that was introduced in chapter 1, but it is a prevalent opinion that many ethnocentric Bolivians hold to be true.

Marfa Hinofuentes, a prominent spokesperson for MOCUSABOL, sayera, and civil rights activist, wrote of a similar situation while promoting the Saya and Afrobolivian culture in Santa Cruz Department in the southeastern region of Bolivia. She mentioned how due to a lack of knowledge concerning the existence of Afrobolivians within Bolivia, many people in Santa Cruz mistake black Bolivians for Brazilian immigrants. In the book *Movimiento indígena en América Latina*, 2006 (Indigenous Movement in Latin America) Hinofuentes speaks about a particular occasion where she and a few other black Bolivians were approached by some local *Cruceños* (residents of Santa Cruz) who questioned their “qualifications” to speak about Afrobolivian issues. She recalled them spewing a host of insensitive questions and remarks at her and her group such as “why are you here?” “You are strangers here!” “You are not indigenous, so you cannot speak about (injustices)” (Escárzaga & Gutiérrez, 2006, p. 96). Hinofuentes further mentioned having had similar experiences before. This opinion in no way reflects the sentiments of all or even most Bolivians, but for the sake of this project is worth noting because it serves as an example of the lack of knowledge of the existence of the Afrobolivian people.

The research subjects who reported having heard of the Afrobolivian social movement largely identified the Saya as their only means of knowledge. This was particularly interesting to me as the research subjects identified the Saya, *as* the Afrobolivian social movement. To me, this seemed to correlate directly with the strategies of MOCUSABOL to use Saya itself as a tool of outreach. Some of the young adults noted they had become aware of the movement because activists from black organizations came to speak at their universities, and a few even mentioned discovering the Afrobolivian social movement by listening to the radio. This fact was also



particularly interesting to me because the radio has momentous influence in rural areas. In many households, it is still the sole source of news and entertainment. MOCUSABOL continues to utilize the radio to keep rural communities informed of new developments in La Paz and to discuss issues of interest to people living in the Yungas. In fact, just before his election to the Bolivian national assembly, Jorge Medina Barra served as the spokesperson for CADIC on the radio, an activity he continues to do today. On his official webpage, Barra celebrates the recent launch of *radioafrobolivia.com*, a free media streaming website that will transmit his radio show to listeners all over the world. Barra's radio program "Raíces Africanas" (African Roots) has served the people of the Yungas and La Paz for 14 years where its primary goal is "to inform and entertain" the Afrobolivian people. The site features sections explaining the history of CADIC and dozens of depictions of sayeros and various landscapes of the Yungas.

As previously mentioned, 5 individuals from the Yungas participated in this portion of the project. I believe it is helpful to evaluate their responses separately. As expected, all 5 participants reported being familiar with the Afrobolivian social movement. As citizens of the Yungas they were also well knowledgeable of the Saya. Rolando Arias Ureña, a 34 year old coca vender immediately began to laugh upon hearing my question. "Yes I know about the movement! That is what we care about here my friend, you are in the village of the blacks!" Although this type of response may have seemed predictable, it was worth asking as the follow-up question regarding the prevalence of black culture in Bolivia yielded varied responses both in the Yungas and in La Paz. Though some participants reported having heard of the movement, the general census suggested that black culture is only prevalent in the black communities and not so much outside of them. If the participants from the Yungas were to be omitted from this analysis, the data set would change slightly regarding the young adult's familiarity with the Afrobolivian

social movement and their perceptions of black culture in the country. If the Yungas residents were excluded from the data set, the percentage of individuals unfamiliar with the movement would drop from 33% to 25% as knowledge of Afrobolivian issues is stronger in the Yungas.

## **2.6 Chapter conclusion**

The majority of the MOCUSABOL activists that participated in my study, believed the movement was successful as of June 2015. Most individuals believed this was the case because Afrobolivian interests groups have gained higher memberships, because of certain governmental actions, and the perceived wider-spread recognition of the Afrobolivian social movement. Moving forward, the activists wanted to see increased membership within MOCUSABOL, more national and international recognition of the movement and the Saya. My desire to discover whether or not blackness was prevalent in the country and the assertion by activists that knowledge of the Afrobolivian social movement had become more widespread, influenced my fieldwork with the young adults. My research revealed that many people between the ages of 20-35 had no knowledge of the Afrobolivian social movement, however those that had heard of the movement associated it with the Saya. The majority of the young adults in my study did not believe Afrobolivian culture was prevalent in the country either. Therefore, according to my findings, the Saya is an effective vehicle for outreach, and the Afrobolivian social movement is not as well-known in the country as the activists believed.

## CHAPTER 3: Saya Reception

### 3.1 My experience of the Saya

In this chapter I will discuss my experience attending a Saya performance and the reactions of others that I observed during the event. Aspects of the Saya such as clothing and lyrics will also be analyzed. Attending the Saya performance provided me with the opportunity to experience the Saya for myself and to contextualize its significance as a unique form of entertainment and how it helped to promote awareness and activism. The reception of Saya outside of Bolivia will also be briefly discussed as this knowledge can provide an idea of the possibility of the Saya crossing even wider barriers.

Upon finishing my interview with the President of MOCUSABOL, I asked him to describe to me in his opinion, what exactly made the Saya so special. He explained to me that Saya is a musical art that his people have been dancing for generations. “Saya has its roots in Africa,” he explained to me. I found myself deeply astounded by the way Mr. Flores spoke so passionately about the Saya. After I continued to express my curiosity about it, he later invited me to a Saya performance that he and his fellow sayeros were scheduled for at 10:00 pm that night at *La Discoteca Malegría*, a local nightclub, which I gracefully accepted.

I did not know what to expect when I arrived at the nightclub later that night. I wondered what it would be like. I wondered what kind of spectators would be present at this event. Many of the performers scheduled that night had participated in interviews with me, and now I would finally have the opportunity to see them “in action.” The thought of the entire experience was very exciting because I wanted to see how social activism was translated through the Saya.

I arrived at the nightclub twenty minutes early and was quite shocked to see that the crowd was very racially diverse. Prior to attending the Saya performance, I had only seen Bolivians who I perceived to be of Mestizo or African heritage. It was predominately younger people roughly between the ages of 25- 30, who were not very representative of the Paceños that I had become accustomed to over the preceding weeks. These night clubbers were mostly composed of tourists from all over the world and some Bolivians (of many skin tones.) The tourists were very representative of the international individuals that frequented some of the hostels that I had lodged in, a combination of Americans, Europeans, and Asians.

Also, upon entering the club, many people assumed that I (as a black man) was a performer and some even applauded me as I made my way into the crowd. The crowd of about 200 people who had congregated into this dark tiny one story building all seemed overwhelmingly excited to watch the performance. People shouted and applauded, even though the sayeros had not yet arrived to the stage. There was a makeshift barrier made of chairs that separated the exuberant masses of spectators from the large empty floor space that was to be utilized by the performers. Since many assumed that I was part of the show, I had a wonderful view of the full arena as I was able to navigate toward the front of the crowds with ease. It seemed to me that the mere anticipation of this performance alone had somehow created an atmosphere of total exhilaration because the crowd had begun to chant “Saya! Saya! Saya!” People throughout the crowd also began to prepare their mobile phones to take pictures and videos of the performance.

Around 10:35 pm, the building roared with delight as the sound of beating drums filled the air. A dozen performers sprinted out of the darkness into the vast sea of cheering spectators. The performers, a few of them I had just interviewed only hours earlier, were now all dressed up

from head to toe in beautiful white garments. The women danced and sang while the men beat the drums and stamped their feet. The people in the crowd jumped up and down while the sayeros sang and danced. As I looked around me, I could see many people standing on stools and tables in search of the best possible view.

As soon as they began to sing and dance the music of their ancestors, it seemed as though everyone in attendance started bobbing their heads and waving their hands in the air as they reveled to the sounds of the drums and entertainment. At the time I could not tell if the song was in Spanish or not because the drums were such a prominent part of the presentation that it was extremely difficult to make out the lyrics. The dark space was also constantly illuminated with the flashing white lights and the soft glows from cellphone screens that myself and others were using to commemorate the moment. The intensity of the Saya could be felt throughout the building, with sound waves emanating from the drums and through the floorboards. It is safe to say that throughout this Saya extravaganza, everyone seemed to enjoy it. I didn't observe anyone standing still throughout the performance. I could hear people rows and rows behind me clapping and cheering as throughout the performance.

I was appalled to discover that the Saya performance was only about 15 minutes long. I was sure it was much longer than that. It was a truly life-changing experience to witness such appreciation of Afrobolivian culture by people of different colors and nationalities. After the performance, spectators were given cards and pamphlets containing information about MOCUSABOL and how to arrange/attend future performances. A few people stayed behind to chat and take photos with the Saya performers. Not surprisingly, I was approached to participate in random group photos as well which I found quite humorous.

Something that especially called my attention was the fact that most people began to leave the building right after the performance ended. As I scrambled to secure a few more interviews from the Saya performers that I did not recognize, the building became radically less congested. The bar was not closing any time soon which led me to believe that people had most likely come to this club solely for the purpose of watching the Saya performance. I imagine that some people may have traveled a long way to witness this event because there were large groups of people in line for taxis despite the walking-distance proximity of hostels, hotels, and other nightlife activities.

In reflection, I am still mesmerized by the Saya performance that I attended that night. It was nothing less than unforgettable. I believe that the sheer power that the Saya has on people, and the historic and cultural significance it has for the Afrobolivian community is what gives me hope for MOCUSABOL and its national objectives. The Saya is a great tool that can continue to bring awareness to the Afrobolivian cause both within the country and abroad.

### **3.2 Saya Dynamics**

After attending the Saya performance, I was still very much fascinated by the entire event. I wanted to know what everything meant. Why did the performers dress the way they did? What was the significance of some of the instruments that were used? Although the lyrics were not as clear to me in this particular performance, I wanted to know what words they sang and the significance of the lyrics. As the bar was heavily filled with foreigners, I was also very curious how Saya was received by other travelers. It was abundantly clear to me that everyone in attendance seemed to have enjoyed themselves just as Isabel and Victor had suggested.

While in pursuit of the answers to these questions, I learned many new things about the Saya and the origins of the performance I saw that night. Everything from the hairstyles the women wore to the way the men stomped their feet had significance. The clothing of the male and female performers were different but equally as rooted in tradition. Both the clothing and instruments were influenced by three very distinct cultures, Spanish, African, and Aymara. Saya attire transformed consistently over the centuries, adapting to the times and preferences of the performers. The *polleras* (skirts) are great examples of this continuous change. During the colonial years, female sayeras wore simple smocks given to them by their Spanish overseers (Ballivian, 2014). After the abolition of slavery, the polleras the sayeras wore began to resemble those worn by Aymara women in surrounding communities. Aymara tradition is also displayed in some of the hairstyles and headdresses of some Sayeras (generally older).

Aside from the obvious Aymara influence in the donning of bowler hats by some Sayeras, the *pichica* hairstyle is a more common display. Pichica is a hairstyle characterized by two braids worn towards the back of the head. Sayeras also wear their hair in a style known as *seque*, characterized by multiple braids worn towards the back of the head. This style is most common amongst younger female performers. (Ballivian, 2014)

African influences in clothing, rhythms, and hairstyles have been passed down to sayeros for decades and have remained intricate aspects of the Saya experience for both spectators and performers. Male Saya performers wear clothing items similarly colored with those of their female counterparts. Sombreros are sometimes worn by male sayeros during performances which can vary in style. Depending upon the style of the sombrero, it could be of Spanish or Aymara origin. The *sombrero de paja* (a traditional handwoven hat made of palm leaves) is a popular choice for older sayeros. Saya performers typically wear white garb with various colored

embroideries sewn into them. This is the standard for both men and women's clothing [see figures 2-3]. Various articles of Saya clothing follow this standard including ponchos, skirts, pants, and shirts. This multicultural rooted clothing has largely become the standard for Saya performers today.



Figure 2: Female sayeras



Figure 3: Male sayeros

As mentioned earlier, the Saya is constantly changing. As an expression of Afrobolivian grievances and triumphs, the lyrics are created and recreated on a song by song basis. In recent years, Saya performers have adopted a tradition of paying homage to Manuel Isidoro Belzu who is considered a hero in the Afrobolivian community for liberating the Afrobolivians from slavery. Therefore, sayeros celebrate Belzu's memory by beginning most of their songs with the phrase *"Isidoro Belzo Bandera ganó/ Ganó la bandera del altar mayor"* (Isidoro Belzu won our freedom/ He won the highest altar.) As Saya is a "living" art form, there are many different songs that are created every day. The Saya songs of today mostly reflect pain, sadness, political/social issues, protests, and other issues of concern to the black community. The



following lyrics are an excerpt from a Saya song featured in the 2013 documentary entitled *Solidaridad en La Saya* (Solidarity in the Saya.)

*Isidoro Belzu bandera ganó, ganó la bandera del altar mayor... hemos trabajado siempre,  
Pero siempre somos pobres. Los ricos hoy en día hablan de la pobreza,  
De pobreza que ande saber, si en su mesa jamás faltó una migaja de pan.*

Isidoro Belzu won our freedom, he won the highest Altar...we have always worked,  
Yet we are always poor. Nowadays the rich talk about poverty,  
Being poor one would know, if on your table a breadcrumb is never wasted.

In this example, the lyrics are used to express the sorrows of poverty. Poverty is a common grievance of citizens from the Yungas. Saya lyrics can also be used to celebrate culture and can exhort positive emotions. In the next example, Saya lyrics are used to celebrate AfroBolivian women. (Gobierno Municipal, 1997)

*Negrita, no te me vayas, no me dejes aquí solo. ¿A quién voy a poder darle tanto amor  
que hay en mi pecho?*

Black woman, do not leave me, do not leave me here alone. To who am I supposed to give all this love that I have inside?

Another Saya song that is widely sang in the Yungas is a song entitled *Si yo fuera presidente*. (If I were president.) It is a song that can have a variety of meanings but is likely to represent a longing for the easy movement of people, knowledge, ideas, goods/services, and

opportunities between the Afrobolivian communities of the Yungas to the nation's capital of La Paz.

*¡Si yo fuera presidente formaría un puente!  
Formaría un puente ¡Caray! De Coroico hasta La Paz.*

If I were president I would build a bridge!

I would build a bridge, Yes! From Coroico to La Paz.

Saya lyrics can also be ambiguous and can be as diverse as the people who perform them. Although the vestments and lyrics are constantly changing for Saya performers, the instruments used in the Saya have remained standard since the beginning. Perhaps the most prominent instrument of the Saya is the drum and the *Cuancha* (a cylinder-like percussion instrument.) the beating of two distinct drums (the *bombo* and the *Caja*) creates the dominant blare of the Saya. The cuancha is a hollowed out log with a series of grooves that produces a unique sound similar to the güiro instrument where a stick is rubbed against the grooves. Generally, the drums and cuanchas are played exclusively by the male performers while the women dance to the sounds resonating from these instruments. (Ballivian, 2014)

### **3.3 International reception of the Saya and the Afrobolivian social movement**

The World Wide Web is a phenomenal resource for investigating the impressions of the Saya by foreign spectators. There is a large selection of blogposts, Saya performances which people have videotaped and uploaded to webpages and discussion boards. Aside from individual travelers who have recounted their experiences of the Saya via the digital outlets mentioned above, a number of people all over the world are expressing their desires to witness a

performance for themselves. There are currently about a dozen Facebook groups that celebrate both the Saya and the Afrobolivian social movement that boasts hundreds of members and supporters from all over the world. Many people posts pictures and videos of their experiences, which when viewed by others, also assists groups like MOCUSABOL by publicizing the Saya.

One particular blog posts especially highlights the joyful impression that the Saya left on a group of young international travelers. An individual screen-named Mariel Torrez, recounts experiencing the Saya while leading a group of volunteers within the Bolivian Yungas. Torrez does not specify her own nationality or the nationality of the volunteers, but it is evident from the images provided that the individuals are not from the area. She spoke of sayeros coming to perform for the group and what a joy the event was for everyone in attendance. [See figures 5-6]

*“We didn’t remain so much time in our seats because they invited us to dance and discover some “Saya moves” that our hips did not know that they were capable of. It was quite an exercise actually because [Saya] is a catchy Bolivian dance that combines rhythms from Africa, the Andes and some other tunes all at the same time.” - Mariel Torrez*

For this group of individuals who were likely unfamiliar with the significance of the clothing, the lyrics, and philosophy behind the Saya, it represented a time for them to enjoy themselves. For the average spectator enjoying the performance within Bolivia and abroad, who may be unfamiliar with the Afrobolivian social movement, the Saya is more entertainment than it is a call for collective activism. However, the practice of utilizing the Saya as a vehicle for outreach is still beneficial for Afrobolivian activists because it serves to keep the Saya relevant and transnational. International journalists have also taken interest in the Saya as it is the subject of countless articles in a number of languages. Journalists from the BBC, Reuters, and Al Jazeera have published articles on Afrobolivian issues, especially highlighting the coronation of Julio Pinedo which has been translated in within their multi-lingual subsidiaries.



Figure 4: A group of spectators observe a Saya performance



Figure 5: Spectators engage with sayeros

### 3.4 Chapter conclusion

Despite the fact that many aspects of Saya are rooted in tradition and have various cultural and political implications, for the average spectator who is likely unaware of the Afrobolivian social movement and the many grievances that it serves to address, the Saya is merely entertainment. It is known for its “catchy” rhythms, loud drums, fast pace, and unique dance moves. This is the presentation of the Saya that the average viewer has come to enjoy. As the Saya is performed by Afrobolivians, visually it succeeds in raising awareness of the existence of Bolivians of African descent for observers.

## CONCLUSION

Saya, the well-guarded traditional musical art of the Afrobolivian people is undoubtedly the most precious gem of Afrobolivian culture. Being passed down from generation to generation, the Saya has become a matter of pride for many sayeros. In the late 1980's the Saya was used as the primary method of outreach by the MOCUSABOL organization which also prides itself on being a Saya-orientated organization dedicated the advancement of the Afrobolivian people. MOCUSABOL activist were able to fuse together objectives of the Afrobolivian social movement with the history and culture of the Saya which ultimately fused these things together. Saya which was once seen as only an aspect of Afrobolivian heritage had become synonymous with the Afrobolivian social movement.

While exploring the work of MOCUSABOL, my research revealed that many MOCUSABOL activists believed that the movement had produced many results (successes). Two of these successes being that more Bolivians had become aware of the Afrobolivian social movement and that knowledge of their communities had become more widespread. My study revealed that many Bolivians between the ages of 20-35 in La Paz department had no knowledge of the Afrobolivian social movement. Also, the majority of the young adults of my study did not believe that Afrobolivian culture was prevalent in the country either. Therefore, according to my findings, the movement was not as well-known in the country as some of the activists had believed, neither was the existence of their communities more well-known.

Although a host of historical and cultural aspects make up the Saya for performers and people familiar with the movement, the vast majority of spectators both within Bolivia and abroad view it as music (entertainment) not necessarily through the lens of pride and resilience that the sayeros have expressed. However, as the Saya is performed by Afrobolivians, visually it

succeeds in raising awareness of the existence of the Afrobolivian community. With every passing day, Saya is being discussed and shared on a variety of websites perhaps unbeknownst to many in Bolivia. Each time this happens, the Saya becomes more globalized and the Afrobolivian social movement becomes more relevant and publicized.

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